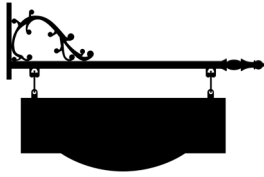


2



Kate dragged Jillian into the kitchen and yanked her around to face her.

“Did you know?” Kate’s face was white and taut.

“No, I promise. Don said last night he’d checked someone in, but I didn’t look at the name.”

“I want him out of here!”

Jillian laid a hand on her shoulder. “Settle down. Don’t you think you should find out why he came?”

“No. I don’t want to speak to him. Just ... just get rid of him. Please.” Tears glistened in Kate’s eyes.

Jillian let out a slow breath. It had been ten years since Luke Brantley walked out on her sister. As far as she knew, Kate hadn’t seen him or spoken to him since he’d turned his back on their engagement and gone off with Tara Wright. Kate was upbeat and fun. She dated occasionally, but she hadn’t had a serious relationship since Luke’s devastating exit from her life.

“Okay, leave it to me.”

Jillian pushed through the swinging doors. Luke was alone, diffidently grasping a sheaf of bacon with the tongs and laying

it beside his omelet. She walked toward him and spoke as he reached for a banana.

“Luke, I’m guessing you’re the guest who checked in late last night. Our night clerk mentioned it, but I didn’t realize it was you.”

He turned toward her, holding the plate and the banana, a hesitant smile on his lips.

“Jillian. Is Kate upset?”

“She asked me to speak to you. Are you here for any particular reason?”

“Well, sure. To see Kate.” He moved to the nearest table and set down his food, then turned to the coffeemaker.

She stood waiting. No way would she make this easy for him, after what he’d done to her younger sister.

Luke returned with a steaming mug and sat down. He blinked at her as if surprised. “Have a seat, Jillian.”

“No, thanks. This is a busy time of day for us.”

He shrugged and began to eat. He seemed unconcerned, his attention on the food.

“Why are you here?” Her voice had a sharp edge.

“I told you—I wanted to see Kate.”

“After ten years?”

He sipped his coffee and set down the mug. “Maybe I’ve begun to realize what an idiot I was to throw her over for Tara.”

Jillian processed that while he peeled his banana. “Where’s Tara now?”

His handsome face squeezed into an unbecoming frown. “Back at our house in Brewer. Or should I say at *her* house?”

“You’re separated, then.”

“Nearly divorced. Should happen any day now.”

Jillian frowned. “That takes at least sixty days.”

“Like I said, it should be final soon. It’s over.”

She waited while he finished the banana. The wind tore at the trees outside the large windows. When he reached for his fork, Jillian said, “Kate doesn’t want to see you. She doesn’t want you here at all.”

Luke paused and gazed past her toward the tossing trees and the broody sky. “It’s getting nasty outside. I thought I’d stay another night. Wait until this storm passes.”

“You can get home before it breaks.”

He chuckled without mirth. “I don’t have a home anymore.”

She studied his face for a moment. “You must have been staying somewhere.”

Luke picked up his napkin and wiped his mouth. “One can’t impose forever on the kindness of friends.”

Something hardened inside her. Friends, not family? It would take quite a lot of freeloading and bitterness for a friend of hers in a similar situation to wear out his welcome. On the other hand, if he truly had nowhere to go ... She gave herself a mental shake. There were other hotels in town.

“What about your job? Don’t you have to work?”

“I’m taking a couple of personal days.” Luke’s expression softened. “Look, I promise I’ll leave tomorrow. Just ... let me stay here one more night, okay? I really like my Phileas Fogg room, and it will give me time to make other arrangements.”

Oh, did Don have to put him in that room? It was the one Jillian had just redecorated, with the *Around the World in Eighty Days* theme. She loved it too. Ordinarily, if a guest said something like that, she’d immediately ask if he’d read the book, and did he like the movie posters and other creative touches she’d collected for the room. But this was Luke. With Kate hurting in the next room, she would not offer him the slightest scrap of friendliness.

Still, she felt her barriers crumble just a little. Luke was still

charming, and that smile ... To tell the truth, she'd always thought he was terrific for Kate. The whole family had liked him. Until he smashed Kate's heart to smithereens.

"I'll speak to my sister." She whirled and strode into the kitchen before he could reply.

Kate was fitting a few more cups into the dishwasher, her lips in a grim line.

"He says he wants to talk to you," Jillian said. "Apparently, he and Tara are splitting up, and he says he realizes what an idiot he was."

Her sister barked a disdainful laugh.

"I don't know what happened between them," Jillian said.

Kate grimaced. "We don't need to. We know who's out of the house, don't we?"

"Well, yeah. He said Tara's got the house."

"That says a lot."

"He wants to stay one more night because of the storm."

Kate glanced toward the windows on the back of the house, facing the bay. "It's not even raining yet."

"I know. I told him he could get home before the hurricane hits, and he says he's homeless."

"Oh, great." Kate scowled and reached for the box of soap pods. "He's not staying here indefinitely, if that's what he has in mind."

"I agree." Jillian watched her close the dishwasher and start it.

Finally, Kate turned and faced her, every muscle tight. "I don't want to talk to him. At all. And I want him out of here. I don't care where he goes. I don't want to know a thing about it or his situation with Tara. Just make him go away."

That made sense. Kate had held on to the hurt for a long time. Jillian had watched anxiously as Kate finally started allowing male friends into her life. In fact, she'd accepted a

date from persistent but shy admirer Geordie Kraus, one of Rick's fellow officers, for Friday night.

"Luke did say if we gave him a day's reprieve, he'd try to make other arrangements for someplace to go."

Kate let out a big sigh and leaned on the counter as if she would crumple without its support. A blast of wind made the windows shudder, and something flew across the back patio.

"Oh," Jillian cried. "There goes a deck chair. We need to get those in."

She ran through the storage room and out onto the side porch, then around to the back of the house. While she chased the chair, Kate grabbed another that the wind had trapped against the porch railing. They wrestled the two chairs, a small table, and two potted plants into the storage room, and Jillian slammed the door. They stood gazing at each other.

"That's pretty fierce." Kate scrubbed a clump of wild hair back from her face.

"Yeah. I wouldn't want to be driving in it right now."

After a moment's silence, Kate said, "One night, and that's it. I'll just stay out of sight when I can. I can start making fresh muffins now for tomorrow. Maybe he can help you make sure there's nothing else outside that we should put away. But even if he helps, he pays the full regular rate."

"Understood." Jillian brushed a hand through her hair and resolutely turned toward the door.

Luke still sat where she'd left him, working on what she guessed was a second omelet. When she broke the news to him, he nodded soberly.

"Okay, then. I appreciate it."

"Someone's coming later to help put up storm shutters," Jillian said. "Are you willing to help with that?"

"Sure. Just let me know when." Luke polished off the last bite of omelet and took his dishes to the stand in the corner.

Then he headed up the stairs that wound from the lobby up to the game room landing on the second floor, which was close to his room.

An hour later, Rick was back, holding his hat on as he pushed across the parking area to the front porch. Together, he and Jillian worked to shut the door.

“You okay?” Jillian asked.

“Yeah. I’ve got an hour, then I’ve got to check on other people close to the bay. Oh, by the way, Zeb’s not feeling well. I told him not to even consider putting up his flags today.”

“Right. Do you think I should go over? I could drive.”

“No, don’t do it.”

“Okay. Maybe I’ll give his nephew a call.”

“That sounds better. Tell him not to try to come until the hurricane’s past. Now, what needs doing most? The shutters?”

“Yeah, I think so. And Luke said he’d help with that.”

“Luke?”

Jillian winced. “Luke Brantley’s here. We didn’t realize it until breakfast. Don checked him in last night, not knowing he was Kate’s ex.”

“Oh, brother.”

“He wants to ride out the storm here. Then he says he’ll leave. But he did offer to help with storm prep.” She raised her eyebrows. “Our generator’s down in the garage. I thought maybe we ought to get it up here.”

“Get him down here.” Rick’s scowl was plainer than Zeb’s warning flags would be.

“Don’t you start in on him, Rick. Kate’s not going to talk to him, and he knows that. She’s going to stay in the background, and he seems to have accepted our terms. Don’t get him riled.”

He held up both hands in surrender. “I’ll play nice. I don’t suppose his wife’s with him?”

“Uh ...”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“They’ve split up.”

Rick rolled his eyes heavenward. “I’ll keep him busy for the next hour. You make sure Kate stays out of sight.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Good. We do *not* want him hitting on her.” Rick went to get out the shutters and tools, and Kate called Luke’s room.

“Luke, my brother’s here, and he could use your help.”

“Sure,” Luke said. “Where is Rick? In the lobby?”

“No, I think he’s in the storage room right now, or maybe out on the side porch.”

When Luke came down the elevator wearing his jacket, she directed him around the porch and in through the side door if he didn’t find Rick outside. Then she flipped through her address book, where she kept Lee Wilding’s number for just such cases as this. She’d consciously avoided adding him to her contacts on her cell.

She picked up the desk phone and punched in his number. She was mildly surprised when he answered promptly.

“Hi, Lee, this is Jillian Tunney.”

“Well, hi, Jillian. Good to hear from you. Wait. Is Uncle Zeb okay?”

“That’s why I’m calling. The hurricane is coming—”

“Tell me about it,” Lee said. “I spent yesterday afternoon securing my boat.”

“Yeah, well, it’s really windy here already, and Zeb didn’t run up any flags this morning. My brother went over, and Zeb’s not feeling well. I just thought I’d tell you.”

“Should I come up there?”

“Not today, certainly. We’ll keep an eye on him. He’ll probably be fine. But you might want to call him.”

“Of course. And if it’s at all serious, I’ll drive up as soon as Cloris has done her worst. Or I could take the boat up.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea right now.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s pouring buckets here now.”

“Really?” Lee was only a couple of hours down the coast. “They said it would hit here around suppertime, but it wouldn’t surprise me if we saw rain before that. The wind’s really howling.”

“You’re right on the water too,” he said.

“Not *right* on. We’re a little farther back than your uncle’s house, but our bank is shallower, and the carriage house where Kate and I live is closer to the bay than the inn.”

“Hmm. Well, I wish you the best. Have you got guests?”

“A few. One of them’s out there now with Rick, putting up our storm shutters.”

“Good. You don’t want broken glass when those hundred-mile-an-hour gusts start flinging stuff around.”

“Right. Well, I’m sure you have things to do too,” Jillian said. “I’ll let you go.”

“Okay. And if I come up, we can touch base.”

“Sure. ’Bye.” Her stomach clenched as she put down the receiver.

Lee liked her—she knew that. But if he had ideas about asking her out, he’d be disappointed. She had settled on Craig Watkins, Rick’s sergeant. They hadn’t talked about making their relationship exclusive, but she considered it that way. She hadn’t dated anyone else in the five years since her husband died, and right now, she had no desire to look around. She’d tried to make that clear to Zeb—but had he passed the news on to Lee?

The phone rang as she headed toward the kitchen, and she turned back to the lobby.

“Novel Inn.”

A repeat guest was calling to cancel the booking he’d made for the next night. No surprise. Jillian made the necessary

changes on the computer and went to check on Rick and Luke's efforts.

They'd already shuttered the storage room, kitchen, and living room windows, which faced the bay. Now they'd gone around the side of the house and were working on the large dining room windows.

"You guys are doing great," she yelled, hugging herself against the icy wind.

"These are the last ground-floor rooms where there's no porch," Rick noted. "Do you want us to do the rest on this level or start doing the upstairs windows?" The upstairs windows had regular, decorative shutters, not the more solid storm shutters. They could be closed from inside the rooms, which meant the guys wouldn't have to climb ladders in the gale.

"Well, the wind's coming from the east. We should probably do as many as we can."

"Okay. Make me a list of the rooms that are occupied. We'll get as many as we can, but my time's more than half gone."

"I can take care of the ones that close from inside, if you show me how to do one," Luke said.

"Great, buddy. Thanks." Rick clapped him on the shoulder.

Jillian hurried back inside. The quiet haven of the inn greeted her. As she made her short list, she pondered Rick's attitude pivot toward Luke. Instead of being still angry with him, Rick was treating him the same way he had ten years ago, when Luke and Kate were engaged—like a friend. And a potential brother-in-law? She certainly hoped not.

She supposed it was hard to work with Luke and not get positive vibes from him. He was likable and a willing helper. Personally, she wasn't ready to drop her resentment and skepticism. She'd be interested to hear Rick's impressions later.

By the time the two men came inside, she'd taken two more cancellations, and Rick's hour was up. Even so, he went

up the stairs to Luke's Phileas Fogg Room to give him a quick tutorial on the upstairs shutters.

The phone continued to ring. This time it was Mindy Nelson, the part-time housekeeper, ringing in on Jillian's cell phone.

"Hey," Mindy said. "I tried to come over to clean, but there's a humongous tree down on my street. It took down the power lines, and they're telling everyone to stay put until it's cleared."

"Don't worry," Jillian said. "We've had several cancellations. I don't expect anyone new tonight, and four parties have checked out. Kate and I can handle doing up those rooms."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Stay home, Mindy."